

Olympic coins won't finish as well as ads say

By Roger Boye

Buyer beware: Some advertisements are badly overstating the rarity potential of Uncle Sam's Olympic coins.

For example, one recent promotion touts Olympic silver dollars as "extraordinary collectibles" and a once-in-a-lifetime investment. The two-page spread in a hobby magazine includes an ordering coupon for PandaAmerica Corp. and Numismatics Ltd., California companies selling the coins.

In reality, many experts predict that all three Olympic commemoratives [two silver dollars and a \$10 gold piece] will underperform the general coin market because the number of pieces being made—although relatively small—will be enough to meet anticipated demand for at least a decade. A few pros even suggest that unless precious metal values rise sharply next year, Olympic coins could drop in price by 20 percent or more in dealings among collectors.

In another ad, the United States Mint got carried away by calling the Olympic gold piece "one of the most unique coins ever minted." Copy in the 10-by-14½-inch display forecasts great demand for gold coins with a "P," "D" or "S" mint mark.

In actuality, demand is below the expectation of some people. When the Olympic coin program ends early next year, mint executives probably will have sold far fewer than the 2 million gold pieces and the 50 million silver dollars they are permitted to make by law.

The gold-coin ad, which appeared in the Wall Street Journal and elsewhere, also misleads readers with a chart listing the retail values of obsolete U.S. gold pieces minted between 1908 and 1930. One of those coins is worth \$19,000 in select uncirculated condition, the ad says, implying that prices of Olympic gold coins also will spurt into the stratosphere.

For several years, the United States Postal Service has filed complaints against companies that run allegedly deceptive ads. In a widely publicized case, for example, postal officials objected to an advertisement for Morgan silver dollars in "very fine condition," in part because the ad copy claimed that such coins are extremely rare.

The recent Olympic coin ads are not as bad as the Morgan dollar promotion. Also, money from each Olympic coin sale made by the United States Mint helps to pay for the Los Angeles games and the training of athletes, two worthy endeavors.

Still, Uncle Sam and other marketers of Olympic coins should be setting a better example.